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Religion and public policy

Religious toleration as a foreign-policy aim

A hard look at freedom

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FOR Katrina Lantos Swett, who chairs one of the two American agencies that are mandated to monitor religious freedom, life is full of pleasant and unpleasant surprises. On a trip to the Middle East a few weeks ago, she had a brusque encounter with a senior member of Egypt's new administration who adheres to the zealous Salafi reading of Islam. As the daughter of two holocaust survivors, Ms Swett told him of her personal horror over recently unearthed statements by Egypt's new President Mohamed Morsi, who in 2010 urged Egyptians to "nurse their children and grandchildren" on hatred for Jews and Zionists.

"His president, I put to him, was saying that young people should be raised to hate people like me. And I asked the official to imagine how it would be if the president were to change course and say anti-Semitism was a stain on the nation's honour, it wouldn't be tolerated any more. The president would be hailed across the world."

Her interlocutor declined to answer, so she later put the same question to a prominent member of Egypt's reformist camp, who replied: "Yes, Morsi would be hailed across the world—but the following day he would be assassinated."

Experiences like that prompted Ms Swett to say, in testimony to a Congressional committee on February 27th, that anti-Semitism remains a "deep, abiding and intractable" problem throughout the world—including Europe, despite the progress European societies had made in combating anti-Semitism since 1945. She noted that in Hungary, the land of her grandparents, a political party wanted a list drawn up of Jews posing "a national security threat"; that in Russia, skinheads were engaging in violence against Jews; and that anti-Semitic graffiti was an increasingly common sight in big European cities, with French Jews reporting the highest level of violence in recent years. More contentiously, she cited the fact that

some European governments ban kosher slaughter, and that there have been proposals in Germany and Norway to ban the circumcision of baby boys.

Identifying the full range of threats to the liberty of Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Bahais and every other faith is the never-ending task of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which shares with the State Department the job of pressing countries to respect the commitments on liberty (including article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, promising freedom of conscience) which they have signed. As an independent, bipartisan body (selected by Congress as well the administration), USCIRF tends to be more strident in its denunciations than the State Department. For example, the State Department now identifies eight countries – Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan – as "countries of particular concern" in respect of religious repression: a status that compels the administration to choose from a range of remedial actions, from scoldings to sanctions.

USCIRF wants at least eight more countries added to the list, including Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Nigeria, Iraq, Vietnam, Pakistan and Egypt. It has also named Turkey, although the Commission's members were divided in their assessment of that country.

Whatever its real results, the American practice of watching and promoting religious freedom is being imitated, to some extent, by other democracies. The Canadian government has just created a new post of religious-freedom monitor. Germany's legislature voted in 2010 to bind the government to lobby for religious liberty. Promoting religious freedom is one of the declared aims of the British Foreign Office.

Yet American religious freedom-watchers see a perpetual risk of their cause being subordinated completely to other foreign-policy concerns. Some of the most repressive regimes and societies (Uzbekistan and Pakistan, for example) are countries whose help is needed by NATO in Afghanistan; an excessively sharp rebuke to either Egypt or Saudi Arabia would risk disrupting a long-standing strategic partnership.

That is one why reason why campaigners for religious freedom are apprehensive about how much attention, if any, the new secretary of state John Kerry will pay to their cause. "The work of the US Commission has been a model for other Western countries. It would be ironic if the United States were to lose interest in religious freedom just as other countries were starting to imitate us," says Elizabeth Prodromou, a former vice-chair of the commission and professor at Boston University.

Nina Shea, who heads a project on religious freedom at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think-thank, says she will be watching closely to see whether the new Obama administration acknowledges or denies the religious element in some of the world's bloodiest conflicts. She was dismayed, for example, when a State Department official seemed to ascribe Nigeria's bomb attacks on Christians more to poverty than to religious zealotry.

Whether they work inside the corridors of power or outside them, all religious-freedom advocates in Washington, DC, find they have to make pragmatic arguments as well as moral ones. "There are good national-security reasons to invest in religious liberty," insists Ms Swett. "A country's respect for religious freedom correlates with many other desirable things, like higher living standards, more democracy, greater rights for women…these are the sort of allies we want to have. This is in our hard interest, not just a soft moral imperative."